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The Battle of Brooklyn

By
Mrs. Eugénie M. *Wife* (Raye) Smith



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Dedicated to
Mrs. William Cumming Storp
President General
National Society Daughters of the American
Revolution

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The Battle of Brooklyn

By Eugénie M. Rayé-Smith.

Hail! oh, birth-year of a nation!
Independence day has rung,
But a stronger declaration
Comes than flows from pen or tongue:
Blows must vindicate the station
Sought the world of States among.

Hail, to thee, oh, isle devoted,
Set the Atlantic surf along!
Soil of Brooklyn, henceforth noted
First to spurn the invading throng!

Here, mid thy fair hills and valleys,
Prospect slope and Greenwood sod,
First resound the patriot rallies
For a new land under God!

Hail! oh, freemen, bravely fighting
Now, petitioners no more,
But Americans uniting
To defend your home and shore;
Hail to you! our cause inditing
Thus in deeds forevermore!

With early dawning of the fateful year,
That year of seventy-six, the patriot ear
Caught tidings from the land beyond the sea
Of mighty armaments, whose aim should be
To crush the island city of the West;
So 'mid the Winter's rime was broke the crest
Of steep Columbia Heights, which watchful lay
On Brooklyn shore, across the peaceful Bay.
Here soon frowned Stirling's guns, and Brooklyn's boast,
A stalwart band of horse, held faithful post
'Neath Waldron and 'neath Boerum down the coast;
And, day by day, a motley, queer-armed host,
From north and south land, mustering valiantly,
Foretold the importance of the strife to be!

So came the Spring, and with it Washington
Triumphantly from Boston lately won.
And lo! the battle forecast grew apace;

Where stores now stand the picket found his place;
Across the Heights of Brooklyn, reaching out
From Gowan's Creek to furthest Wallabout,
Rose Box, Greene, Putnam and the Oblong Redoubt,
A goodly vantage ground! as plainly seen
And planned out by the skill of General Greene.

June now with tory plottings wore away
And brought Howe's army up the Lower Bay
To camp and wait at Richmond. Then the day,
The day of days for Freedom, glorious broke!
Men English slept, American awoke!
To echoing cheers the immortal deed is read,
Joy-fires at barracks burn, king-faith is dead
And bullets made of George's leaden head!

But, hark! the guns are booming down the bay!
The Rose and Phoenix, British frigates, weigh
Their anchors and with answering gun for gun,
The gauntlet of the harbor barriers run
And take their station in the Tappan Sea,
While panic-stricken laymen pack and flee!
At sunset, hark! again the cannon roar!
Lord Howe is sighted off the Island shore,
And August scarce is ushered on its way
Four hundred ships are anchored in the bay.
Cornwallis and Sir Clinton join the throng
And Hessian hirelings full eight thousand strong.

Meanwhile the Rose and Phoenix spying lay
In Tappan Sea, till, pestered night and day
By doughty Tupper's fleet, they sail off down
Mid drenching rain, one Sabbath morn past town
And join their kind now in the bay below,
Where war-plans grow and ripen sure though slow.

With anxious eye the patriot chief scans o'er
Each post of vantage on the lengthening shore.
What can his force of twenty thousand do,
Half-sick, ill-clad, ill-armed and scattered through
The whole exposed, outlying country? Where
Must he concentrate? Will the foe repair
By sea or land? Such is his constant care.
Now fever strikes near by at his right hand:
The noble Greene succumbs, he who had planned
Each well-picked Brooklyn station; and command
Descends to Sullivan, while General Hand
Is set to watch the Narrows with his band.

With evening of August twenty-first
Across the camp a summer tempest burst

And left four patriots lifeless in its wake;
Then came a messenger with news to break:
"Full twenty thousand British board to-day
The transports dropping to the Lower Bay!
They move upon Long Island!" Thither then
The patriot chief sends forth fresh corps of men;
And in the morn uncertainty is fled;
The peaceful beach of Bath is lined with red;
Then Hessian blues, to fill the compact dread,
And butcher freemen at so much per head!

Swiftly Hand's pickets off to Brooklyn fly.
"To arms and to alarm posts!" is the cry!
Small need for undue haste, for Howe will wait
Until the Admiral's fleet co-operate.
But balked by headwinds and the port denied,
Useless the ships beat up and down the tide.

Meanwhile, the British Howe, too prone to think
Americans disposed to cringe and shrink
Before him, sends out word through all the land,
Inviting loyal muster to his band.
"Peace shall be yours, protection to your farms
If now you lay down your rebellious arms!"
So promised he. Great then was his surprise
To see but few to meet his bidding rise!

Thus stretched across the peaceful plain they lay,
A restless, watchful army, day by day,
With one eye on the shipping in the bay,
The other on the hills that reached away
From west to east between them and their prey.
Along those patriot northern hills were spread
Our meagre outposts, massing where there led
Three roads from out the southern level plain:
First, west, the shore-road, clinging to the main,
Then midway, Flatbush, forking to the height
And, far to eastward, on the British right
The Flatlands road through the Jamaica pass,
Well watched save the Jamaica one, alas!
Far up the Flatbush pass an early stand
Cornwallis sought, opposed by General Hand,
And Hessian forces here for many a day
Were thinned in frequent skirmish and foray;
A valiant patriot handful kept the way.

So dragged the weary waiting hours along
To Friday, when, with words of courage strong
And noble hope for Freedom's cause and fame,
The new-born nation's chief and guardian came.
But while with cheer he lifts the drooping heart,

With anxious eye he notes the ignoble part
Of base marauding and of wasteful strife,
False faith to friend and reckless risk of life.
So on the morrow Putnam takes command
At Brooklyn Heights, while Sullivan his stand
At Flatbush holds, along the Prospect Hills.

Now dire discomfiture the British fills ;
Still ride the ships off near Gowanus Mills,
Still from the Upper Bay by headwind bent ;
A patriot wind, by God of freedom sent !
No help can they afford the landed force,
Which General Howe resolves must take its course
Alone and storm the hills and ramparts near
Without bombarding vessels in the rear.
News now is brought of entrance o'er the height
Unguarded left upon the British right.
Howe's plans mature ; he cuts his force in three ;
To Grant assigns the shore road from the sea ;
Leaves Heister with his Hessians set midway
At Flatbush ; then Cornwallis draws away
With Clinton and with Percy, till his host
At Flatlands full ten thousand men can boast.
His plan to gain the outposts at the back
While Grant and Heister feign a front attack,
Till guns proclaim the flanking move complete
And front and rear the British block retreat.

Now falls the eve of battle o'er the land,
The weary land, that shows on every hand
The tale of spoil—burnt field and meadow bare,
The smoking haystack and the cattle rare
Where lowing herds late sniffed the mellow air.
From Flatlands on the ocean plain peals out
The evening gun ; the wild things flit about
Alarmed, the marsh land rolls the sound along,
And all sinks quiet back, save where the throng
Of red clad warriors move with silent stride
To form in rank and gain the country side.
Northeastward lies the road across the plain
Which Clinton and Cornwallis slowly gain,
While Howe and Percy last the rear-guard take
And leave deceitful camp-fires in their wake.

Now toilsome through the night they push their way
O'er miry road and creek, till, near the day
They cross the open field and stand before
The Half-way House of Howard. Here the door
Swings open to the imperious Howe's demand :
"Come forth," he cries, "mine host, and show the land

That winds about the pass ; we seek a way
To avoid the rebels and reach Gowan's Bay ;
Lead truly or your life the price shall pay !"

Spare thy precautions, Howe, the pass is free.
E'en now five patriot lads, too zealously
Patrolling past their post, the captives' fate
At Clinton's quarters rue, alas ! too late !

On through the unguarded way they file along,
That British army, full ten thousand strong,
Now westward, cutting in between the throng
Of gallant patriot outposts and the line.
So skillfully their silent plans combine
That on the next morn's early stroke of nine
They're nearer Putnam at the Brooklyn Height
Than Sullivan or Stirling, on his right.

From out the woods, the Bedford Crossing near,
Now patriots under General Miles appear.
Too late they come to block the foemen's way
And soon they grapple in the fell foray ;
The guns boom out to Heister o'er the way ;
He then drives Sullivan from the redoubt
At Battle Pass, who turns his men about
To seek the lines. Vain hope for fair retreat !
Sir Clinton's flanking column is complete
And throws him back again in utter rout
Against the Hessians. Wild the hue and shout !
The tramp of horse, the braying trumpet's sound
Re-echo all the woodland hills around !
The clash of sword, the volleying musket shot,
The shriek and groan of comrades ne'er forgot !
How fierce they fought to cut a backward way,
That valiant band at noon-tide on that day !
And when within the fort they come at last,
Behold them scan their feeble ranks aghast !
Brave General Philip Johnston, where is he ?
Slain with the others, battling manfully ;
And Sullivan ? A prisoner now with Miles
And hundreds more—trapped by those flanking files !

Meanwhile, Cornwallis on the King's Highway
Moves westward to repeat this flanking play
Upon the patriot right, off near the Bay.
Here at the shore-road, early in the day,
Where stood the old Red Lion Tavern then,
A slender force of Pennsylvania men
Held picket under Burd and had all night.
Long ere the earliest streak of morning light
The British Grant has caught them in his net

And marches northward toward the parapet.
 Quick Parsons hears the news and hastens down,
 And Putnam, getting word in Brooklyn town,
 Despatches Stirling with the best men there,
 Prized youth of Maryland and Delaware;
 Then Atlee's riflemen and Kachlein's, too,
 Of Pennsylvania's noblest—staunch and true!
 And under Clark, Connecticut's brave sons.
 Each band to Stirling's banner quickly runs,
 And where Third Avenue now winds its way,
 They march off lightly southward by the Bay.
 There, mid the first gray light of early day
 They sight Grant's column coming to the fray.
 At Wyckoff Hill Lord Stirling forms his right,
 Kachlein below in front, and on the height
 The strength of Maryland and Delaware;
 The left becomes then Parsons' special care,
 With Clark and Atlee, who the burden share.
 Already Atlee takes the British fire
 And curbs the onset, then his men retire
 To second Parsons on the army's flank.
 Grant's fourth brigade now fronts them rank on rank;
 It threatens to enfold them—wide they spread
 Their long thin line, till, rising near ahead
 They see the hills; they rush the ground to take;
 The British volleys soon their courage shake;
 Lieutenant Parry cheers them on again;
 They win the height! but mid his valiant men
 The leader voiceless falls; his noble form
 They bear away; again the British storm
 The hill, where, from the brush and tops of trees,
 Our riflemen pick off their men at ease;
 Among them Colonel Grant—the harvest drear
 Of that fell onset rued they many a year!
 Well may that hill by patriot valor won,
 Be known as Battle Hill, the deeds there done
 Shall shine while shines for us fair Freedom's sun!
 But how fares Stirling off upon the right?
 Grant's sixth brigade with early morn gives fight;
 Their light troops run in close, but soon retire;
 A patriot battery on them opens fire;
 Then British howitzers wheel on apace
 And cannonading echoes through the place.
 Unwaveringly they stand, each patriot son,
 Outnumbered by the British four to one!
 But, hark! what catches Stirling's faithful ear?
 Guns from the Port Road! back upon his rear!
 Shall he retreat? He scans for news the road;
 No orders come, strange things his thoughts forebode.

To Grant the signal on the air is brought,
 Howe's signal for the general onslaught.
 He moves up fast. Now Stirling's mind is made;
 Off toward Gowanus Mills his course is laid;
 Hence lie the lines and safety—futile plan!
 Too late he turns! he meets the British van;
 That flanking column! Like the stag at bay,
 He stands his ground—calls Major Gist away
 With half of Maryland's battalion, then
 Bids all the rest cross Gowan's Creek and fen!
 They ford and swim and carry safely o'er
 Their captives and their flag to Brooklyn shore;
 While half the youthful brave of Maryland
 To guard their crossing face Cornwallis' band!
 Oh! deed devoted for the race to be,
 None nobler shall this old world ever see
 Than man should lay his life down for his friend,
 A path to health and safety to defend!
 There at the old stone house of Cortelyou
 'Twas done by Maryland's four hundred true!
 Beat back they take the woods, then form again;
 The grape and round-shot mow them down like grain!
 They close and drive the gunners from their stand
 Beneath the house-walls; then the faithful band,
 Their mission done, o'erwhelmed on every hand
 By gathering numbers, scatter o'er the land,
 Some few with Gist swim safe Gowanus way;
 But most with buff and red that fateful day
 Bestrew the green. Now Stirling rounds the height
 And yields his sword to Heister, and ere night
 The British capture Atlee and his men,
 While Parsons hides in safety mid the fen!
 Afar, within the lines on Brooklyn Height
 The patriot chief had viewed the unequal fight.
 "Good God, what brave men must I lose this day!"
 His agonizing soul was heard to say.
 Yet not in vain the toll of death they pay!
 Oh, glorious battle-field of Prospect West,
 Well may the lofty column crown thy crest!
 Here first in open field the foe we met
 As army against army squarely set!
 Here 'gainst o'erwhelming odds the test was made
 Of patriot valor, nevermore gainsaid!
 Come, read—"Here Maryland's four hundred sons
 The American army saved"—aye so it runs
 In words of stone. Let patriots' fond desire
 A living legend blaze in hearts of fire!
 Aye, saved an army; for the day well worn,
 Howe halts before the lines and rests till morn.

Within those lines, distressful and forlorn
They sleep, our remnant force, with battle torn;
But they are young, oh, God of battles! Thou
Wilt nerve again the freemen's hearts that bow
In sorrow; they have learned upon this field
Their first hard lesson; God of battles, shield
And save them from the waiting, bitter foe
That thus has schooled them, and they soon will show
Themselves invincible to tyrants' blow!
The dull dawn o'er the sleeping campment breaks;
With echoing cannon call the rampart quakes!
But, hark! the answering peal of heaven shakes
The hills and torrents swirling to the plain
Make faith in fire but puerile and vain!
The God of battles truly grasps the rein!

With first faint light the patriot chief draws near
The works and speaks his word of strength and cheer;
Though sore his heart his spirit knows no fear;
His grasp is firm, his mind is keen and clear!
Another day and night in vigil flies—
No sleep has visited his watchful eyes!
And now he troubled sees near Putnam's height
A strong redoubt thrown upward in the night!
With reinforcements late from Harlem come
Nine thousand barely is the meagre sum
Of tentless, hungry, sick and shivering men
Who face the problem of attack again!
In front the British and behind the Bay,
Where, let the south wind blow, the whole array
Of warships then will enter from the fleet
And quickly make the girdling cut complete!
While yet the strait is clear we must retreat!
Hard stand for thee to take, John Morin Scott!
To yield one inch of this thy native spot!
But so thy chief has said, and speeds away
A messenger to Hughes across the Bay,
To bid him scour for boats the waterside
From Spuyten Duyvel Creek to Hell Gate tide,
Impressing all for service on that night
Within East Harbor; Heath at Kingsbridge then
Is bade to help and man with fishermen
Of Marblehead and Salem, hardy band
Of Hutchinson's and Glover's brave command.
Their use, relief of troops on Brooklyn shore
By fresher ones from Jersey ferried o'er.
Thus for not only foes but patriots too
The important move was veiled, none but the few,
The chief's great generals, his purpose knew.
Such secrecy the times imperious made;

So general orders bring men to parade,
At seven, full armed, accoutred for the change,
While Mifflin with his later force must range
The rampart to deceive the British post,
And form the rearguard of the patriot host.

Black falls the night, with blackness sure God given!
As sure as cloudy pillar sent from heaven!
And mid the blackness, mud and rain's downpour
The silent army moves off toward the shore;
Hitchcock's out first, then others one by one
Close in, march on and so till all is done!

But, meanwhile, at the Brooklyn ferry slip
Disorder reigns—sail-boats to make the trip
Must have the southern breezes soft and fair
As well as warships in the offing there!
And row-boats are too few the whole to bear.
Have Nature and her God our cause forgot?
Back impious thought! vain man deny Him not!
E'en now His breath, borne from the fair south-west,
Puffs out the sail and smooths the water's crest,
Wafting the laden craft in safety o'er
With men and armament to New York shore.
And think! what hand but His who stilled the wave
Led Hessianward the spying tory slave?
Who dulled the attentive ear of outpost foes
When from the lines the random shot arose?
Who held the ramparts when by grave mistake
The faithful Mifflin, ordered to forsake
His post, moved off obedient to the shore
And left the lines unwatched an hour or more?
And when the dreaded dawn broke o'er the height
Before the covering force could take its flight
Who spread the gray, fog curtain with its damp
But welcome thickness softly round the camp
Till every man was safe across the Bay
Where, bathed in sunlight, New York City lay?

Ah, Howe, the much scorned skill of Washington
Beneath your eyes a weightier point has won
Than e'er you made, off east at dawn of day,
Around the unguarded pass four miles away!
And we who look on from our vantage here
Back o'er the trying days of that first year,
How can we rightly estimate the man
Who bore the brunt of Congress' blundering plan
To brave the well known mistress of the wave
And, navyless, an island post to save?
What wealth of patience and of staying power,
What force of will and courage in that hour



Bespeak the nation's leader among men!
 Ne'er in our early history again
 A nobler figure looms than when that night
 Great Washington controls an army's flight!
 There in the future generations' sight
 The tireless horseman looks off from the slip
 And points the waterway to every ship!
 And (call it not the fancy's idle play!)
 Are those not words of fire that light the way
 And vie with lesser symbols on the Bay?
 "Here, August, seventy-six, our Washington
 Saved"—Shall we say, "an army"? Let it run
 The rather, "saved a nation at the birth,"
 That Freedom's life might endless be on earth!

Since the patriot Hebrew band
 Passed the Red Sea through,
 Nobler flight 'neath nobler hand
 Ne'er this old world knew!

Patriot leader, thou hast led
 Forth thy faithful men
 That thou may'st, when months are fled
 Lead them back again!

Lead them back through many waters,
 Here our sires to be!
 Promised land for sons and daughters;
 Land of Liberty!

Here, because thou led'st that night,
 Here are we to-day,
 Fighting now a newer fight
 In a newer way!

Thou did'st save us, few indeed,
 That, to millions grown,
 We should never know the need
 Thy brave soul had known!

Here, because thou saved'st us then
 We shall win nor yield;
 Win in civic rights for men
 Brooklyn's Battle Field!

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